

Distinguished Docs: A Score of Recent Worthy Documentaries

By Mike Canning

It could be said (I'll say it) that we are in a Golden Age of the full-length documentary film. In the past decade, long-form non-fiction cinema has reached ever wider audiences and has had perhaps greater impact than ever before in film history. Michael Moore's provocative essays have been the most publicized and notorious (his 2004 "Fahrenheit 9/11" was the first documentary to earn more than \$100 million in box office receipts), but others have also had considerable audience and impact in the last ten years, such as "An Inconvenient Truth," "Supersize Me," "Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room," and the recent "Waiting for 'Superman.'"

What this essay compilation wants to highlight, however, are several superb documentaries that did *not* earn the biggest bucks or reach the largest audiences. They represent several smaller, but still potent, true stories told by talented filmmakers. This is a shout out to those Netflix subscribers, Blockbuster renters, or video-streamers to give such films a look. None of those listed below earned more than \$5 million in box office (most of them substantially less), and a number were seen by, at most, less than one hundred thousand souls in this country.

So here, in alphabetical order, are 20 exceptional documentaries from the last decade, with a summons to the filmgoer to discover some wonderful, overlooked work.



Bonhoeffer (2003) - Dietrich Bonhoeffer (photo left) was a German pastor who, despite pacifist leanings, became involved in the plots to assassinate Hitler, leading to his arrest and execution at the end of World War II. This moving documentary describes his life, from comfortable days in a Berlin suburb through academic success and a telling American sojourn to his work as a minister. Martin Doblmeier directs in a stately, restrained way, mixing historic footage and personal interviews. Besides the intrinsic drama of Bonhoeffer's life, Doblmeier offers a trenchant "essay" on the early relationship between the Nazis and the German church as well as a serious discussion of the demands of faith, a subject surpassingly rare in any American motion picture.

The Boys of Baraka (2005) - Four 12 year-old black boys, each one inimitable and who live in one of the most violent ghettos of Baltimore, are selected to travel 10,000 miles away to attend an experimental boarding school (Baraka) in rural Kenya, to experience a kind of education they can't get in their own country. In an area with no modern conveniences or distractions (or violence), they receive things that are lacking in many American urban public schools: a sense of structure and discipline as well as individual attention from adults who genuinely want them to succeed. After the African

idyll, which is cut short because of funding, the kids return home to results that are a mix of heart-breaking and heart-warming.

Encounters at the End of the World (2007) – One of the most original—and iconoclastic—of cinematic voices, German Werner Herzog, conducts a fascinating tour of the “end of the world,” i.e., the McMurdo Sound scientific base in the Antarctic. There he finds a collection of brilliant misfits—like himself—who gradually reveal why they have come to this special place. We meet a scientist speculating on penguin homosexuality, a survival guide discoursing on white-out, a researcher who milks mother seals, as well as vulcanologists, a pipe fitter, and a former Colorado banker who drives a bus. Besides the farrago of people, there are marvelous vistas of that icy world, highlighted by one wordless, stunning underwater sequence.

Every Little Step (2009) - A fascinating look at auditions for that prototype show of auditions “A Chorus Line.” Turns out that the real-life auditions can be just as compelling as the musical itself. The film follows a varied batch of musical comedy hopefuls as they try out for the musical’s 2006 revival on Broadway. The auditions themselves (offering a rare inside look at the process) are very well edited and paced, and heightening the film’s impact is the inherent drama of the auditions themselves: Who will be cast? The filmgoer finds a rooting interest in these talented, committed performers. This is a competition with both pizzazz (see photo above) and class in a story that takes a little over an hour-and-one-half to tell.



Food, Inc. (2008) - Best documentary of its year for my money (it received an Academy Award nomination) and a rude wake-up call as to what we have been and are doing to our national food supply. Using the testimony of good food gurus Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser, among others, the film is scrupulous in building its case against the national domination of “industrial” food production. It also avoids stridency and the facile, giving a sound critique of what the corporate food business is doing to us. Especially telling are segments of how the skewed system produces obesity among the poor (Hispanic families are particularly affected) and how sick, trapped animals become so much of our food source.

The Heart of the Game (2005) - An inspirational story set in the world of girls’ high school basketball. Darnellia Russell is a gifted player from the poor part of Seattle who elects to play at middle class Roosevelt High under the tutelage of firebrand coach Bill Resler. The two’s journey takes them through racial sensitivities, hard work, and tough decisions (young Russell leaves school at one point to have a child) only to lead up to a Washington state girl’s basketball championship. These two contrasting figures

become part of an unpretentious epic that took director Ward Serrill seven years to make and which ends in a thrilling fairy tale finish.

Mad Hot Ballroom (2005) - A great and heartening film about a kids' competition, with much of the flavor of "Spellbound" (see below). Here the contest is a city-wide ballroom dancing challenge among fifth-graders in the New York City public schools. The girls are uniformly sweet and eager to learn and compete, while the boys are somewhat embarrassed and reluctant by the enterprise. It is their teachers and instructors which are an inspiration—patiently guiding their novice charges into learning a range of dances, from ballroom to tango. It all leads up to the big finale dance-off in a Manhattan park. This is a performance in which you end up rooting for everybody!



Manufactured Landscapes (2007) - A documentary both artful and provocative. Filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal uses stunning photos of Chinese industrial sites taken by Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky and expands them into filmic essays on what we are doing to ourselves as societies. Sequences of massive assembly plants (see left), of computers being scavenged, and of scut work on the Three Gorges Dam are mesmerizing, showing a China we are only

now beginning to grasp. Additionally, one section showing the breaking down of ships in Bangladesh, is a modern vision of Dante's Inferno. The opening tracking shot—a long wordless glide past what seems like acres of assembly tables in one Chinese plant—is simply stunning, a marvelous set-up for what is to come.

Mondovino (2005) - "Mondovino" ("World of Wine" in Italian) is a documentary with taste, the taste of the grape. It is an intriguing tour-d'horizon of the contemporary wine world: the vintners, the companies, the consultants, the distributors, and the tasters--and, just as importantly, its increasing market globalization; the film covers wine making in France (see photo right), Italy, California, and Argentina, inter alia. It discusses viticulture's geography, scale, family history, mingled with what is, for many respondents, an almost religious feeling for wine. This is a salubrious conversation-starter, a film to view with your best friends, after which you have an animated discussion over a couple of bottles of Chateau Latour or Montepulciano or Three Buck Chuck...



Murderball (2005) - Super-tough quadriplegic athletes--who DON'T need your sympathy--compete in full-contact rugby in souped-up wheelchairs, and we get to know them up close and personal. We see them overcoming unimaginable obstacles and smashed lives to compete in the Paralympic Games in Athens in 2004. This documentary uncovers a fascinating, highly competitive, macho world you didn't even know was out there and reveals characters, like the amazing athlete Mark Zupan, who are fascinating to know, having remade their lives after personal tragedy and mishap. The film's drama is much aided by depicting, in the murderball final, a true world-class rivalry between teams from the US and Canada.

Music from the Inside Out (2006) - Intimate, inspiring look at one of our best symphony orchestras, the Philadelphia Orchestra. The genesis of the film came from the musicians themselves, who, after a "bitter" 1997 strike, began to brainstorm ideas on how to restore some luster to the orchestra's reputation. They approached filmmaker Daniel Anker about making a film, wherein they revealed their love of music and playing. The musicians, led by concertmaster David Kim, are interviewed about their motives for music-making, then are shown on tour, participating in chamber music, and—in the finale—pulling out the stops on a luscious Brahms symphony.

My Architect: A Son's Journey (2003) - A illuminating, complex film which traces the life, work, and character of the renowned architect Louis Kahn (photo left) through the



dogged researches of his illegitimate son, Nathaniel Kahn. The film serves as both catharsis and discovery for the filmmaker, who visited his father's buildings and haunts, meeting his father's contemporaries, colleagues, students, wives, and children to piece together the elements of his famous father who never knew him—and who was found dead and penniless in a men's room in Penn Station when Nathaniel was 11. Equal parts

fascinating family saga, biographical detective story, and catalog of Kahn architectural works, "My Architect" captures you both through its tale and its art.

Operation Homecoming (2007) - A unique documentary about our troops' experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, based on writings by the soldiers, Marines, and air men fighting in these conflicts. Some of the writings appeared in The New Yorker in the summer of 2006 and a larger assortment was published as a book by Random House. The film draws upon selected submissions for the book by military sources, and the texts, including journal entries, letters, poetry, and essays, are read by actors young and old, from Robert Duvall to John Krasinski. It's a remarkable portrait of our troops at war--their complexities, shocks, doubts, and fears--written with honesty and without an political agenda.

Paper Clips (2004) - Whitwell Middle School in rural Tennessee is the setting for this documentary about an extraordinary experiment in Holocaust education. Struggling to grasp the concept of the six million Holocaust victims in their social studies class, a group of students decides to collect six million paper clips to better comprehend the full extent of this crime against humanity. The film details how the students (some seen at right), through working on the project, met Holocaust survivors from around the world and how the experience transformed them and their small community.



Shake Hands with the Devil (2004) – This searing documentary looks at the 1994 Rwandan genocide through the tortured eyes of Canadian Armed Forces General Roméo Dallaire, who was in charge of a United Nations peacekeeping force during this spring 1994 massacre. The General's appeal for 5,000 soldiers to stem the violence but the soldiers were never supplied and the killing began. One's heart aches with this story of horror (including graphic scenes of the massacre itself) as recounted by the thoughtful General Dallaire, who almost lost his reason after what he thought was his failure to stop the slaughter. The film ends on a redemptive note as the General poignantly returns to Rwanda ten years later.

Spellbound (2002) - This is—dare we say—a spell-binding documentary that covers the 1999 National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC, told in mosaic form by following eight finalists from different regions of the country. The kids portrayed are utterly charming in eight different ways, and we learn much about them and their varying family contexts. The last third of the movie concentrates on the final bee at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in downtown DC, where clever editing gives us the built-in drama of the competition, contestant after contestant struggling with their words, their parents agonizing, the never-changing baritone drone of the word reader, as, one after another, the kids slowly drop away. This finale itself contains more true tension than many other dramatic films that have been released in recent years.

Startup.com (2001) – A compelling video document of the rise and rapid fall of a New York dot.com in the days just before the tech market meltdown in March 2000. While it provides a rare inside look at how the start-up game worked (or didn't work in this case), the film is really more a character study of two—very different--young businessmen. 20-something entrepreneurs Tom Herman and Kaleil Tuzman (see photo right)—the classic inside and out-side man, the techie and the PR guy--try to launch their own American dream of a new web business, only to see it crash in the fickle world of Wall Street. The film was directed by the great documentarians D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus.

War/Dance (2007) - An inspiring documentary which shows the transformation of a group of poor, war-damaged Ugandan orphans, having suffered a ghastly fate in an East African conflict, into a joyous music and dance team ready to compete in a national music festival. The film, made by documentarians Sean Fine and Andrea Nix, focuses on several individual Ugandan kids—all charmers and each with a story more heartbreaking than the last—who live in a northern refugee camp where they are given training in traditional African music and dance. They then travel to the country’s capital, Kampala, to compete in the National Music Festival. A heart-stirrer.

Wordplay (2006) - An intelligent charmer about the crossword puzzling world seen through the granddaddy of the genre, The New York Times puzzle, long edited by the paragon of puzzlers, Will Shortz. Its delights start with the easy-going, intelligent Shortz himself, evidently a puzzler from the womb, who started the American Puzzle Tournament in 1978 to see how the best puzzlers might do against each other. The finale of the film is a gas, a rousing contest between players with whom we have already come to identify. While “Wordplay” can be especially recommended for puzzlers, others may get caught up in it, too, because this is a kind of very “serious fun.”

Young @ Heart (2007) - A triumphantly buoyant and upbeat motion picture depicting the “Young at Heart Chorus” from Northampton, Massachusetts, told through several



key members of the group (see photo left)—whose average age is 81--and their dedicated music director Bob Climan. This seniors group is hardly stodgy but rather specializes in up-tempo pop standards—even some hip-hop—and performs for delighted audiences anywhere from prisons to packed auditoria. As American as this story is, it took a couple of Brits, Stephen Walker and Sally George, to get it made.

Much more than a movie simply about “cute old people” (although many of those are featured), it highlights how the human spirit can be uplifted through song and community.